



## **Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council**

### *Committee Members:*

*Councilor Dennis P. Bidwell*

*Councilor Maureen T. Carney*

*Councilor Alisa F. Klein*

*Councilor Gina-Louise Sciarra*

### **Meeting Minutes**

Date: March 8, 2016

Time: 5:00 p.m.

Location: City Council Chambers  
212 Main St., Northampton, Massachusetts

1. **Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call:** At 5:00 pm councilor Sciarra called the meeting to order. Present at the meeting were the following committee members: Councilors Sciarra, Bidwell, and Carney. Committee member Councilor Klein was absent. Also present from the City Council was Councilor Ryan R. O'Donnell.

2. **Public Comment:** None

3. **Committee Study Request:**

At this meeting the committee reviewed the Committee Study Request that was received at the City Council meeting on March 3, 2016.

Councilor Sciarra indicated that this was a special meeting of the committee. If the committee is interested in proceeding with the study request, then the process will be defined. Based on the wording of the request, Councilor Sciarra indicated that the committee is being asked to consider a number of topics and gather information about those topics. This is the first time a committee study request has been issued, so the process is ground-breaking. There has been a lot of informal discussion about the downtown (Florence and Northampton) economies. There is a lot of opinion expressed on social media or in general conversation about the role of city council and how they can affect business economy and alleviate some of the pressures that businesses are feeling. The stakeholders include business owners, property owners and workers. Many times

they are one and the same, and hearing concerns in a public hearing might be beneficial to understanding the role of the city council.

Councilor Ryan O'Donnell expressed ideas about how he might address the request if he were part of the committee. He recognizes that the request is broad. He cautions that there should be no public expectation as a result of this effort. The work of the committee will be valuable, but he doesn't think the end result will revitalize downtown. What is important is that the conversation take place. If there are tangible outcomes from the committee it would be okay if they ran the scale of visionary to modest. There are a number of things that could be considered that can be categorized in four broad categories:

- The physical downtown environment: recommendations about bicycle parking, or outdoor dining
- Zoning and use laws: revisit definition of home business and reduce restrictions for home businesses within the business district; explore regulations for formula businesses (chain stores); holiday parking fee suspension; percent for art program
- Licensing and permitting : wage theft, pop-ups and short-term occupancy permits, food trucks, survey state laws (M.G.L. Chapter 41 of 1993, for example) for adoption by city council
- internal municipal policy

Councilor O'Donnell also feels that there should be certain exclusions, such as affordable housing, public utility rates, taxes, and parking. He supports community meetings. Just having hearings would satisfy the committee study request under the council rules. The report of the committee could reflect the feedback from the community as a result of those public hearings. Once the report goes back to the city council, the council committee could then decide which issues they wanted to tackle at whatever pace was appropriate.

Councilor Bidwell shared that he has been thinking about the subject matter for a long time. Having served as the Economic Development Committee Chair (a Chamber of Commerce sub-committee), he is well aware of the issues facing Northampton. He suggests a three-step approach, but cautions that the committee should not raise expectations, and the committee should focus on areas that they can have impact. He is aware that there is data available within city departments, such as the Office of Economic Development, and there is value in gathering data and making it available. Terry Masterson is working on an economic indicator report, including rents and occupancy rates, hotel occupancy rates, and comparisons within surrounding communities. Also, gathering other information, such as city revenues due to rooms tax or restaurant tax might be valuable. Also, there is a lot of tourism data out there. Understanding the trends in all of this information would be valuable. There have been surveys done of business owners and property owners to better understand what the issues are in the downtown area. If some of the information can be gathered in one place, the committee could make use of the details in its committee study request. Running in parallel, perhaps the committee can hear from constituents about issues that they are concerned about. It would also be interesting to talk to the

experts, such as Wayne Feiden, Terry Masterson, and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce or the newly emerging D.N.A. and ask what are the top five challenges for businesses in downtown? After gathering all of the information and listening to what people have to say, then the committee would be in a position to identify what the top issues that the committee or council could impact.

Councilor Carney suggested that the committee not rule out any discussion of taxes as part of their study because of the direct relationship between high vacancy rates and the tax relief that property owners get when their property remains dormant. The committee might want to look at this to see if there is disincentive to take a competitive rent rather than leaving a building empty.

Councilor Carney reminded the committee that the issues of wage theft and worker conditions is an important issue to workers in our community and state-wide. She suggested that the committee could look at how high rents, high vacancy, etc. are related to working conditions and wage theft. She reports that the information that she sent to the committee shows how other communities are dealing with wage theft and working conditions. She would like to see a public hearing process where worker representatives can share their experiences and information. There is also data about this issue compiled by UMASS that she would like the committee to see. There are a group of workers who meet every week (primarily downtown restaurant workers) that are ready and eager to speak to the council. Other representatives from other job sectors can speak to other working condition issues as well, such as job mis-classification. Representative Kocot attended a legislative breakfast last week; he spoke about the state acts to prevent wage theft; he sees the state's actions as the strongest around because it expands the scope of the Attorney General's Office to be able to intercede when there are issues of wage theft.

Councilor Bidwell suggested that the City Assessor would be the definitive source on whether property owners get relief for vacant properties. He is confident that there is no program of tax relief for property that has been sitting vacant for a while. If a property owner allows a property to deteriorate due to neglect, then perhaps they have devalued their own property which will reduce the tax. (Councilor Sciarra said that she is aware of the rumor.) He is more inclined to learn what the data reflects. Perhaps there should be a separate resolution that supports the state legislation regarding wage theft. He feels that the committee should gather the data, review the information and deliberate about what they would like to take on.

Councilor Sciarra said that the first order of business is to decide if the committee would like to move forward with the request. A poll of other committee members showed that there is interest in taking on the request. Councilor Carney noted that since there are people and groups who are willing and wanting to speak to their causes, she would like to go ahead and set up meetings. Councilor Sciarra asked the committee to focus on the process of how to move forward. She also noted that there are a lot of non-profit agencies in the downtown area; they could be part of the discussion as they contribute to the economy in many ways. She noted that the discussions should not only involve stakeholders, such as the ones Councilor Carney stated, but also experts who can provide the necessary information and data that is part of the committee's research.

Councilor Carney feels that the committee should begin the public hearings, and that the public hearings can also include the experts as well. There is no need to separate those out. Councilor Sciarra asked whether the goals can be accomplished in one meeting. She noted that a business owner reflected that the pressures of the daytime economy are different than the nighttime economy. Councilor Carney stated that a sequence of three meetings might accomplish the goals. Councilor Bidwell stated that the public hearings shouldn't be segmented. The goal should be to hear from everyone who wants to contribute to the conversation. His bias would be to gather and synthesize data versus conducting public hearings. The data can guide the committee in framing the public hearing(s). He suggested that instead of a public hearing to hear about worker issues, an agenda could be created in which an agenda topic is "worker issues", which might allow workers, employers or others to speak about the topic. Councilor Sciarra supports this idea as long as all represented speakers feel free to comment on the subject.

Councilor Carney noted that the April meeting falls during school vacation. The committee may want to reschedule to a different day. She has been in contact about worker issues and wage theft, and feels strongly that she would like to approach that issue. She would like to use the March 21st meeting to invite people to speak about worker's issues. There may be a need for other meetings. In the meantime, data gathering could be done on the other tax question by contacting the Assessor's Office. She also read in the Gazette that Terry Masterson will be prepared to speak to what will be business owner concerns, stressors and pressures. She is hoping that the committee will reschedule the April meeting.

Councilor O'Donnell commented that if the committee were to announce a public hearing about workers, it might be better to announce any other public hearing that the committee might be having as part of the study request at the same time.

Councilor Bidwell does not support starting off with a public hearing addressing only worker's issues. He would like to show that there is a two or three month plan for how the committee will proceed and how the pieces fit together, and what the potential end product could be; he suggests that the approach should show a deliberative process. To do otherwise would not send the right message or show balance about the process. He would prefer to gather data, without initial testimony from workers. Asking someone to present data, such as vacancy data or rent data, wage data, etc. would be part of the data gathering effort.

Councilor Carney indicated that a presentation about worker data could be presented to the committee on March 21st.

Councilor Bidwell reported about a conversation he had with the Mayor. He noted that Mayor Narkewicz is reluctant to involve the Economic Development Director until he understands where the committee is headed with the information they gather; what exactly the committee would you like for him to do; what the context is in which it fits. Councilor Bidwell has had a similar response from the Chamber of Commerce. There is a lot of useful information available from the Chamber, however, they are reluctant to give up the data until they hear from the committee where they are

expecting to go with the information that they provide. There is concern that this will become a forum for a lot of "speechifying" to no real end. A work plan is needed so that it can be explained where pieces of information fit into the overall plan.

Councilor Bidwell stated that at the next meeting he would be comfortable endorsing a work plan and at that point the committee put out a request for information. Councilor Sciarra clarified that the committee still needs to vote to accept the study request.

Councilor O'Donnell stated that the committee may not be able to develop a work plan until after the hearings have been conducted.

Councilor Sciarra agreed that the plan presented to the public should show the process that the committee will use, including holding public hearings on specific topics and themes. This approach will allow people to think about what they would like to add and where they might fit into the process. This will also send the message that the committee is trying to think holistically about this issue. Councilor Bidwell feels that it is important that there be a plan in place. He agreed to draft a rough plan of action that the committee can consider. This will be sent to the full committee. Committee members should not deliberate or comment upon the draft until the the meeting.

Councilor Sciarra suggested that the first part of the meeting on March 21st should be dedicated to preexisting committee business (5 - 6pm), followed by time dedicated to reviewing Councilor Bidwell's rough plan. The final part of the meeting will be dedicated to getting input about the proposed process and collect any information that presenters make available to the committee. Anyone can come to share reactions to what has been presented or share data that they have available. The committee will invite the Director of Economic Development and the the Chair of D.N.A.

Councilor Carney proposed that the committee begin holding public hearings on April 12 @ 5 pm.

4. **Adjourn:** Councilor Bidwell moved to adjourn the meeting at 5:15 p.m.; Councilor Carney seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 3 Yes, 0 No, 1 Absent (Councilor Klein).

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